Teun A. van Dijk, *Context. Towards a multidisciplinary theory.*
Volume 1. Language, discourse and cognition

Preface

Thirty years ago I wrote a book called *Text and Context.* That book deals extensively, and quite formally, with 'text', but hardly with 'context'. In the last decades, also in my own work on news, racism and ideology, the study of context has increasingly shown to be of crucial importance to understand how discourse is embedded in society.

However, as is the case for the large majority of studies on text and talk, context may be found important, but it is seldom analyzed in its own right, and usually taken for granted or defined rather impressionistically.

Context was generally conceived of in terms of independent social variables, such as gender, class, ethnicity or age, as in correlational *sociolinguistics*, in terms of relevant conditions, constraints or consequences of text and talk in communicative situations, or as 'identity' as in *gender studies* of language.

Both formal as well as ethnographic studies of *indexicality* define contexts rather in *semantic* terms, for instance as referents for deictic expressions, but most of such work is limited to spatial or temporal orientations of participants.

Speech act theories formally accounted for some of the properties of Speakers and Hearers, such as their knowledge, wishes or status, so as to formulate appropriateness conditions, but did not further pursue a systematic analysis of such contextual conditions.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is crucially interested in the social conditions of discourse, and specifically in questions of power and power abuse, but also failed to develop more explicit theories of context as a foundation for its own critical enterprise. Obviously, power is not just shown in some of the aspects of 'powerful speech', and we need insight in the whole, complex context so as to know how power is related to text and talk, and more generally how discourse reproduces social structure.

The *cognitive psychology* of discourse as well as *Artificial Intelligence* have advanced much in the last decades in discovering the processes and representations involved in discourse production and comprehension. It contributed insights into the fundamental role of mental models and knowledge in discourse processing and use. However, also these models were rather semantic than pragmatic. Apart from some experimental studies of individual differences or different goals, no systematic empirical work has been done on the influence of context on discourse processing.

Social psychology, on the other hand, has been among the few disciplines that developed ideas about the structures of situations and episodes that might be used as proposals for the basis of a theory of context, but these were not intended as a theory of context for discourse. Indeed, except in *discursive psychology*, the study of discourse in mainstream social psychology is still quite marginal.

If any discipline should provide insight into the nature of contexts and their influence on discourse, it is *sociology*. But rather ironically the major influence of sociology in discourse analysis has been the *analysis of conversation*, which, at least initially, was even more context-free than much discourse analysis — while focusing more on the structures of interaction than on settings, actors and their properties. Note though that in earlier decades there have been occasional attempts to define social

situations in sociology, culminating especially in the work of Erving Goffman, who may be the sociologist who has contributed most to our understanding of how interaction and talk are situated.

Anthropology, and especially the *ethnography of speaking* and *linguistic anthropology*, have been the only directions of research that since decades have paid explicit attention to the study of context — as an obvious component of 'communicative events' — beginning with the well-known SPEAKING grid by Dell Hymes in the 1960s. Related are the ethnographic studies by John Gumperz and others in *interactional sociolinguistics* on what they called 'contextualization'. Until today these are also the few approaches that have produced (edited) books on context and contextualization.

We may conclude from this very brief summary that in most of the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences that in general there is growing but as yet unfocused interest in the study of context.

* * *

There are many thousands of books, in many disciplines, that feature the word 'context' in the their titles, but the vast majority of these studies use the word 'context' informally as social, political, geographical, or economic 'environment,' 'situation', 'conditions,' or 'background,' and hardly ever in the sense of context of text or talk.

There are a few books in linguistics, discourse studies, and the social sciences that use the notion of context in terms of constraints and consequences of discourse, but most of these studies focus on discourse itself, and not on the complex nature of its contexts. This is of course not surprising, because the very notion of 'context' implies that it is defined

relative to 'text', and that in that case the 'text' (or talk) is the focal phenomenon. That is, context are generally only considered to better understand or analyze discourse. If not, a 'context' study would be pure psychology, sociology or anthropology of settings, social actors and their properties, as well as their cognitions, activities, interactions, social practices or organizations.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

The time has come to take contexts seriously, and to develop explicit theories of contexts and the ways they are assumed to be related to discourse and communication. This book is an attempt to develop just such a theory. It will do so first by examining the (use of the) notion of context and its possible components in several (sub)disciplines, such as linguistics and sociolinguistics, cognitive and social psychology, sociology and anthropology. Against such a background, I then propose my own theoretical framework for a new, integrated theory.

This is the first monograph entirely dedicated to the notion of context, and it therefore should be seen as exploratory. It is a theoretical study inspired by ideas, notions and developments in several disciplines. Although I review a large number of empirical studies, I have no new ethnographic context studies or experiments to report. Instead, I shall illustrate the theory, throughout the book, and especially in its last chapter, with the example of one of the most influential discourses of the last years: The debate on Iraq in the British House of Commons, in which Tony Blair presented and defended a motion that would legitimate his government to go to war against Iraq — a speech and a war of which we all know the dire consequences.

We shall see that of the multiple dimensions of contexts that I shall consider throughout this book, this speech and the following ones by the Members of Parliament offer many examples that confirm that a context-free approach to the study of discourse and conversation is too limited and leads to superficial, formalistic, and sometimes trivial descriptions that seriously under-analyze discourse as it is deeply embedded in social and political life.

* * *

Since intuitively nearly anything may become relevant for discourse — if only the topics we talk about, or the myriad of situations in which we may talk, write, listen or read — a theory of context risks to become a Theory of Everything. It is therefore crucial to literally 'define,' that is delimit, what may otherwise extend to large part of society. Indeed, it is hardly exaggerated to hold that Tony Blair's speech not only needs to be understood as that of a Prime Minister addressing MPs (and the nation, and the world) in the context of a parliamentary debate in the British House of Commons on March 18, 2003, but also as part of U.K. Foreign Policy, the relationships with the USA and the E.U., the Middle East question, and so on.

Unless we want to get lost in endless contexts, we must conclude that not anything that may somehow be understood as 'background' to discourse may be its 'context' when defined in more restrictive, theoretical terms. Context draws on, but is not the same as knowledge of the world. Developing a theory of context, thus, means first of all selecting those elements of a communicative situation that are systematically relevant for talk and text. This meant that I needed to examine how in cognitive and

social psychology, sociology and anthropology such situations are being defined in the first place — and then devise criteria what to include in the theory of context and what not.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

This book is not only exploratory and a review of much earlier work. It also presents and defends a theoretical thesis that, at least for psychologists and some old phenomenological sociologists may be obvious, but which it is not in much of the current social sciences and the various approaches to discourse and communication. This thesis is very simple, but crucial to understand what context is and how it relates to discourse:

> *It is not the social situation that influences (or is influenced by) discourse, but the way the participants **define** such a situation.*

Contexts thus are not some kind of 'objective' condition or direct cause, but rather (inter)subjective constructs designed and ongoingly updated in interaction by participants as members of groups and communities. If they were, all people in the same social situation would speak in the same way. So our theory must avoid social positivism, realism and determinism at the same time: Contexts are participant constructs.

This thesis accounts for the uniqueness of each text or talk (or its fragments), as well as for the common ground and shared social representations of participants as they are being applied in their definition of the situation we call context.

We shall see that psychology has a very useful theoretical notion that places the theory on a solid cognitive foundation, namely that of *mental model*. That is, as subjective interpretations of communicative situations, contexts will be defined as *context models*. Here is what such context models (must) do:

- They control how participants produce and understand discourse.
- They enable participants to adapt discourse or its interpretations to the communicative situation as it is relevant to them at each moment of the interaction or communication.
- They provide the crucial missing link in the cognitive theory of text processing between mental models of events talked about (reference) and the way discourse is actually formulated.
- They define the conditions of appropriateness of discourse, and hence are the basis of a theory of pragmatics.
- They are the basis of a theory of style, genre, register and in general of all discourse variation.
- They are the missing link between discourse and society, between the personal and the social, between agency and structure, and hence confirm that the well-known micro-macro problem can (also) be formulated in these terms, at least for the fundamental domain of language and communication.
- For linguistics and (formal) grammars, context models may be (and partially have been) formalized in ways that goes beyond the referential semantics of deictics.
- They are a crucial notion that allows sociolinguistics to continue more explicitly its development beyond the study of correlations

with social 'variables' — and at the same time focus more on the social influence on discourse structures.

- They make explicit old but still relevant notions of sociology, such as 'definition of the situation', also to be applied in interaction and conversation analyses.

- They show how context also may control aspects of text and talk that are relevant for the participants but are not observable.

- They reformulate earlier frameworks in anthropology for the study of communicative events.

- Finally, as also the contextual and critical analysis of Tony Blair's speech as well as the other interventions in the Iraq debate will show, a more systematic account of context is part of the foundation of Critical Discourse Studies, as well as for all more socio-political approaches to discourse.

Since our theory is only fragmentary, this book is also intended as a stimulation for further research. It deals wit numerous issues that need further theoretical development, psychological experiments, ethnographic description and detailed discourse analysis. The influence of context is often subtle, indirect, complex, confused and contradictory — far from the 'main effects' of independent social variables. Contexts are like any other experiences of human beings — and at each moment and in each situation such experiences define how we see the current situation and how we act in it. It is a fundamental task for the humanities and social sciences in general, and for discourse studies in particular, to show how exactly our text and talk depends on — and influences — such contexts.

* * *

More than any other of my books, the writing of this book has been a tremendous effort of several years. Although developing theory (and analyzing interesting examples) can be fun, one may sometimes despair because of the complexity of the questions involved. When devising a general theory of context and its relation to discourse, we cannot limit ourselves to a more focused study of, say, pronouns, turn taking or metaphor (each in turn already considerable areas of study). One in principle needs to attend to nearly all aspects of social situations on the one hand, and all variable structures of language use and discourse on the other hand. No wonder, therefore, that it took years before I got some grip of the major problems involved, and no wonder that the book, despite the severe limitations I imposed upon myself, steadily grew to its present, 2-volume size. And I still have the nagging feeling that I have only scratched the surface — the same feeling I had about my understanding of discourse when I wrote *Text and Context* three decades ago. I therefore hope that despite its obvious imperfections and incompleteness, others will take up the challenge and further develop the field of *context studies* as one of the major areas of discourse studies in all disciplines of the humanities and social sciences.

Critical comments and suggestions are as always most welcome via e-mail.

September, 2006   Teun A. van Dijk
                                                 Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona
                                                           vandijk@discourses.org